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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to compare the factors that student dropouts report as contributing to their dropping out of school with those factors that "at-risk" students report as influencing their attitudes toward school. These two sets of factors, assessed in two separate studies, include in-school and out-of-school experiences, socioeconomic factors, and participant attitudes toward schooling in general. The two studies obtained in-depth interview data from 65 white female school dropouts participating in the Kentucky Department of Education single parent/displaced homemaker programs and 68 white female disadvantaged high school students considered "at-risk." Findings revealed that respondents from both studies consistently reported home-life experiences which were highly incompatible with school demands (lack of discipline, little parental interest in school/education, many home responsibilities, financial problems, abuse). Respondents from both studies reported problems with peer pressure, drug use, and absenteeism. Other findings concern the relationship between teenage pregnancy/parenthood/marriage and dropping out. (TE)

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Underlying Factors Associated with Dropping Out and Factors Impacting At-Risk Students' Attitudes Towards School: A Comparison Study of Low-Income, White, Females

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to compare the factors that student dropouts report as contributing to their dropping out of school with those factors that "at-risk" students report as influencing their attitudes toward school. These two sets of factors, assessed in two separate interview studies, include in-school and out-of-school experiences, a variety of socio-economic factors, and participant attitudes toward schooling in general. The two interview studies examined are: 1) a study of the factors which influenced participants in the Kentucky Department of Education single parent/displaced homemaker programs to drop out of school, and 2) a study of the factors associated with being at-risk as reported by both educationally and non-educationally disadvantaged high school students.

For the purposes of the second study, "at-risk" students are defined as students who have a history of low grades, high absenteeism, discipline problems, academic course failure, and/or retention (Combs & Colley, 1968; Backman, et. al., 1971; and De Jung, 1988). Educationally disadvantaged students are defined as those who possess one or more of the following characteristics: Living in a poor family, living in a single parent home, having or having had a child, being married, and receiving free or reduced lunch. Stedman, Salfanik and Celebuski (1988), using data from the 1980 High School and Beyond Survey, found that

students who possess a combination of these characteristics have significantly higher dropout rates than do students who do not.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section I provides a description of the data sources, instruments, and methods of data collection used in the two studies. Section II provides a comparative overview of the findings of the two studies. In particular, the findings focus on a discussion of three themes which emerged during data collection and analysis: 1) The compatibility of home environment with school demands; 2) the relationship between teen pregnancy/teen parenthood/marriage and dropping out of school; and 3) the relationship between drug and alcohol use, peer pressure, and absenteeism. Section III presents the conclusions and recommendations for future research.

DATA SOURCES, INSTRUMENTS, AND METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The data for this paper were obtained from two studies: 1) a study of the underlying factors which influenced 65 participants in Kentucky Department of Education single parent/displaced homemaker programs to drop out of school and 2) a comparison study of the underlying factors associated with at-riskness as reported by 68 educationally and non-educationally disadvantaged high school students.

Data Sources

The Single Parent/Displaced Homemaker Study

In the first study the 65 school dropouts interviewed during the summer and fall of 1989 are currently participants in the Kentucky Department of Education community outreach programs for single parents and displaced homemakers (henceforth referred to an single parents). These 65 participants were drawn from 7 of the state's 14 single parent and displaced homemaker programs, selected to achieve a balanced geographic representation of the state of Kentucky. Three of the seven programs are located in urban areas while the other four are located in rural areas. The dropouts interviewed for the study are white females from families of low socioeconomic status, most of whom are currently subsisting at an income level well below the poverty level.

Black, Hispanic, and Asian single parents and at-risk students were not included in this comparison study because the number of minorities interviewed was too small to justify comparison. This small number was not surprising, considering that a majority of Kentucky's population, especially in the rural and mountainous regions, is white. Moreover, most of the interview sites in the single parent study were located on the campuses of area community colleges. Despite program directors' attempts to achieve a racial balance among participants who are served, these programs continue to attract a population that is

predominantly white. Thus, most of the interviewees from the single parent programs were low-income, white females.

The data for the study were obtained in semi-structured, open-ended interviews, some of which were conducted individually while others were held with groups of three to seven dropouts. The interviews were taperecorded. Participants also completed a nine-page survey instrument either before or after their interview, depending on the scheduling circumstances of both the project directors and participants. Participants were asked to provide demographic information and information about their family background, school experiences, peer relationships, and work lives. The instrument functioned as a complement to the personal interviews. Participants who were reserved during the personal interviews often provided descriptive survey accounts of their experiences. The use of a survey instrument also facilitated the quantification of important variables.

The women interviewed were between the ages of 17 and 56. They reported dropping out between the years 1944 and 1989. Their ages at the time of dropping out ranged from 11 to 18. In general, about 50% of the women reported they were A/B (grade) students, whereas the remaining 50% were C/D students. About 34% of them stated they had been retained in one or more grades, and 50% reported that they had been absent "frequently" during high school.

At-Risk High School Students Study

The second interview study was conducted with 190 Kentucky high school students during the fall and winter of 1989. Eighty nine (46.8%) students were female, and 101 (53.2%) were male. Of the 89 females, 68 were white. The 68 white female students from this study were selected for comparison with the 65 white females in the single parent study. As with the dropout study, the schools were selected to achieve a balanced geographic representation of the state of Kentucky. One urban and one rural high school were selected from the northern, southern, central, eastern, and western regions of the state. In addition, school selection was also based on school dropout rates and attendance rates. The schools selected have dropout rates that range between 5.25% and 12.79% and attendance rates between 90.48% and 94.19%.

A counselor or area dropout prevention director from each school assisted with the selection of students and the scheduling of interviews. The counselor or dropout director completed a confidential student information form for each student interviewed. School personnel were asked to return these completed forms to project personnel two weeks prior to the site visit. An early return enabled researchers to review the forms and request modifications in student selection if necessary. These forms provided project personnel with information about

each student's retention, discipline, absenteeism, and academic history. A frequency distribution of these "at-risk" characteristics revealed that 58.8% of the 68 white females had been retained at some time during their academic histories. Approximately 19% had been retained multiple times, and 42.6% had been retained during either their junior or senior year in high school. The mean grade point average for the sample was 1.965. Grade point averages ranged from .075 to 3.5. Approximately 57.5% of the sample had a history of low grades, while 14.7% had experienced a sudden drop in grades within the past two years.

The mean for days absent during the current 1990-91 school year was 6.258 days with a range between zero and 30 days and a median of five days. During the previous year, approximately 60% of the sample had high absenteeism, defined as 10 or more days absence (De Jung, 1988).

Regarding discipline problems, 29.4% had been referred to the office frequently during their high school years, 23.5% had experienced in-school suspension, and 19.1% had experienced out-of-school suspension. In addition, 48.5% were living in single parent homes, 7.4% were married, 7.4% were pregnant, 13.2% had children, and 60.3% were on free or reduced lunch.

Approximately 62% attended rural schools, while 38% attended urban schools. Fifty percent were in the general track, 38.2% were in the vocational track, and 11.8% in the academic track. The students ranged from 14 to 19 years of age. The mean age was

16.35, with a modal age of 17 and a median age of 16. The interviewees were evenly distributed across grades 9 through 12.

Intensive half-hour to one-hour interviews were conducted at the school sites. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. A four-page survey instrument was used to facilitate the quantification of variables and to ensure that interviewers would fully explore five aspects of the students' lives. The instrument was designed to probe specific variables related to students' family, school, work, social, and personal lives. These variables included in-school and out-of-school experiences, attitudes toward participants' schools and schooling, occupational and educational aspirations, student self-concept, and peer relationships.

Data Analysis

We chose Spradley's (1980) ethnographic approach to guide the data analysis phase of the research. The interviews from both samples were differentiated on a number of in-school and out-of-school variables believed to have theoretical relevance to dropping out. The in-school variables examined included: being above the modal age of classmates (Stedman, et al, 1988), perceptions of the fairness and effectiveness of the school discipline system (De Jung, 1988), perceptions of teacher interest in students (Wehlage & Rutter, 1985), peer relationships, and academic achievement (Natriello, et. al,

1988). The out-of-school variables examined included: having a job (other than babysitting or lawn cutting), delinquency or other legal problems, and homelife (Stedman, et al, 1988).

In addition to looking at these in-school and out-of-school experiences, the self-reported factors which influenced single parents to drop out of school were compared with the self-reported factors which influenced at-risk students attitudes toward school.

The in-school and out-of school factors used to organize the data appeared to play varying roles in the two populations. Therefore, only the predominate themes which emerged from both sets of data are actually discussed.

FINDINGS

The findings focus on three themes which emerged during the data collection and analysis phases of the research: 1) the compatibility of home environment with school demands; 2) the relationship between drug and alcohol use, peer pressure, and absenteeism; and 3) the relationship between teen pregnancy/parenthood/marriage and dropping out of school.

I. The Compatibility of Home Environment with School Demands

Parental Supervision and Discipline

In general, respondents from both studies consistently reported home-life experiences which were highly incompatible

with the demands of school. Twenty-eight percent of the single parents and 22% of the "at-risk" students revealed that their parents did not supervise their lives or discipline them to any degree. For some this translated into absenteeism problems and subsequent problems with the court. "There wasn't a lot they [parents] could say. Either they withdrew me from school or we went to court over truancy, so they let me quit." This particular young girl went on to talk about what she thought were her mother's reasons for not forcing her to go to school.

> She wanted me to obtain an education...but that by not making me stay in school she taught me that if I kept sitting at home, I wasn't getting nowhere...if she sat and preached at me it wouldn't do any good. [This student withdrew from school three years in a row and has withdrawn again since the interview]

Other types of ineffective attempts at discipline were also cited. One young high school student talked about how her mother would cry when she skipped school. "[My mother] would say 'Why can't you go to school and do what you have to do...Please go to school, I'll do anything if you go to school.' "

A similar lack of discipline regarding school attendance was evident in the single parent population. For example, one women stated, "They [my parents] said, 'if you want to go, then go; and if you don't want to go, you don't have to.'" Another stated:

> There was probably 12 or 13 of us. When we first started high school we formed a little gang. Everyone had family problems and everyone had things to deal with...So we started hanging together and if one didn't go, none of us went. That's just the way it was..We'd go down to the game room and stay all day on Main Street; and if you came from a family like we did, chances are your parents would never

know. I knew the school knew, but no one ever said anything.

The effects of parental supervision and discipline that was too restrictive had also produced behavioral effects. One single parent spoke for many who lived in these home environments when she said that "[I] couldn't go anywhere, do anything...[I] had to stay at home." Many single parents frequently chose to escape restrictive home environments through early marriage, while some at-risk students responded by misbehaving in school, cutting school, experimenting with drugs, and refusing to do their schoolwork. Interestingly, a large number of teen parents and pregnant girls in the at-risk study said their parents had been overly strict and demanding prior to their pregnancies. An at-risk student who is also a teen parent said of her parents' attitudes prior to her pregnancy that "...[they] were real hard on me..they were too strict. I felt like they were treating me like a kid." She stated that her parents have changed their supervisory and disciplinary style since she has become a parent, and now respect her right to make decisions for herself and her child.

Parental Interest

For members of both populations, a lack of discipline often translated into parents' lack of interest or caring about school. In fact, 44% of the single parents stated that their parents had

little or no interest in education and, 66% stated that their parents did not feel education was important. It is interesting to note that parental attitudes toward education differ significantly among the group of single parents who dropped out after 1975 and the group who dropped out before 1975. In the former group only 17% stated that their parents did not feel education was important as compared to 44% of parents in the older group. The percentage (22%) of interviewees in the at-risk study who reported their parents lacked an interest in education is very similar to that of single parents who dropped after 1975 (17%).

A number of respondents from both groups also discussed the relationship between parents' lack of interest in education and absenteeism among their peers. As one young high school student stated, "I'd say a lot of kids have problems in school because their parents just don't make'em come to school." Another student stated that "[The parents] just don't care."

However, sometimes situations which appeared to be the result of parental disinterest were actually due to the parents' having work schedules which conflicted with their children's school schedules. Some parents worked evening shifts, which prevented them from supervising their children's activities after school. Other parents worked early shifts, which meant they were not able to see their children off to school. In these cases, the parents' schedules limited the supervision they could

provide. The following quote illustrates this phenomenon, "Nobody was there to tell me I had to go, so I took it upon myself not to go." When another student was asked whether her relationship with her parents was a good one, she said, "[my parents] work all the time, I hardly ever see them."

Although some parents expressed interest in their children's education, their unstructured lifestyles were contrary to the routinized, scheduled patterns of school life. These parents' examples, e.g., sleeping late, habitual television watching, provided a role modeling that was incompatible with the routine of school life. That is, almost 16% of the fathers, and 16.6% of the mothers of at-risk students were disabled, retired, or unemployed. In contrast, children from home environments in which at least one parent works appear to experience role modeling which is compatible with the scheduling patterns of school life. One student summarized the beliefs of many when she said, "it's really hard to get up in the morning. I think school is too early...they should start it later in the day."

Parents' Views on the Value of Education

The mothers of 42% of single parents who dropped prior to 1975 did not feel the education of women was very important. The following quote illustrates their parents' views on this issue: "My mom, where us girls was concerned, all we was really going to be was just like her--have a houseful of kids and stay home and

take care of them." As they reflect on their youth, these women cite parental attitudes toward education as an integral part of students' decisions to drop out.

> I think more girls would have went to school if they'd had a chance to if they'd had money and the background. A lot of their parents didn't finish school, and a lot of them don't really think it was all that important. I think it has a lot to do with whether or not a child goes to school, the way they're raised. I mean, if they're never raised to think an education is important, why on earth would they want to go to school?

Moreover, many single parents felt that the view that education "was not important" was regionally accepted and not just present within individual families. "You know the whole area didn't care," stated one respondent, "This is a bunch of farmers; we can live off the farm".

For respondents in both groups, lack of interest in education was sometimes associated with lack of parental achievement. For example, in the single parent population, 75% of the parents had not graduated from high school. (It should be pointed out that 72% also had siblings who had not earned a high school diploma.) Parents' lack of education was sometimes used to justify not continuing in school: "My dad only had a third grade education but common sense...if I took my math home, the man could do it with a third grade education. He was so smart...I used to think to myself if he only went to the third grade, what am I doing going to school?"

Home Responsibilities

In addition to the lack of discipline and interest of parents, the responsibilities assumed by both the at-risk students and single parents were highly incompatible with the demands and experiences of school life (Fine & Zane, 1989). Almost one third of the at-risk students and over half of the single parents assumed numerous responsibilities at home. The responsibilities respondents were forced to assume at an early age may be illustrated by the following quotations:

> I worked basically since I was 11 years old. I came from a large family where it was do your own take care of your own.
>
> Back then you couldn't play...Back then you had to work or you couldn't live.
>
> Mom didn't want me to [drop-out], but she couldn't react again. She had seven kids; she thought if I would work, my helping her would benefit her more than any going to school at this point. Because again, as I told you, education didn't have a lot of emphasis in our home because she was illiterate...You know, hands do more than the mind.
>
> [mother was sick]...by the time I got my brother and sister up and got them ready and off to school, and then my self ready and off to school, and everything else done, I was just worn out and school was the easiest to give up.
>
> The reason I dropped out was that my mom was practically bedfast, and I was the oldest and she needed somebody there....
>
> I had two little sisters that were babies and I had to babysit them while she [mom] worked. And I just had no free time for anything like after school activities. That's all I did was go to school, come home and watch the children and do things around the house...
>
> We were poor. I had like two outfits of clothing. I worked after school to get my lunch money. We didn't have food at the house most of the time. It was just too much for me.

> I go to work everyday after school. We need the money so that my sisters and brothers will have lunch money and money for school activities...Last year we [my sister and I] saved up our money and bought my mom a TV, but we had to pawn it because we didn't have any money for food.
>
> [When asked do you think you have any responsibilities] For a 17-year old I think so; it gets on my nerves. I mean that it's not that I can't stand that my mother is sick [mother has leukemia and daughter assumes role of nurse and has missed 19 days taking care of her this year] or that she's ruining my life, I just don't want her to be sick cause it's too big a responsibility for me....
>
> I have to get a [full-time] job again, and there ain't no choice because he's [boyfriend] going to college and working part time. Its already planned out, and he's already got his financial aid. [In addition to supporting her boyfriend, this girl also cares for her sick grandmother when she is not working].

Financial Dilemmas

As indicated in many of the quotations above, the financial situation at home influenced parental attitudes toward school as well as the responsibilities both the at-risk students and single parents had to assume. Moreover, respondents often cited a relationship between family finances and attendance at school. For example when asked about her high absenteeism, one at-risk student replied:

> My dad is dead, and we [mom, stepdad, and siblings] live off his social security. We don't have house insurance or nothing like that. It's rough...last year I missed 22 days of school, and they were going to take me to court just because I missed 22 days. That's not much school to miss for a whole year. That's a lot of days of being here. But when they took me to court, I didn't like that. My mom had to explain to them it was because I was sick and we ain't all got the money to go to the doctor every time I get sick...so they were like, you need a doctor's excuse every

> time I'm sick. So my mom was going to withdraw me from school last year...

Issues of clothes and dress also played an important role in attitudes toward school, attendance, and dropping out. In one particularly poignant interview, a single parent revealed how her family's poverty level directly affected her decision to drop out of school.

> Children made fun of me when I was in school and I think that's why I didn't make it...holes in my shoes, clothes were given to me and were too big or too small. We didn't get to go to the dentist. You didn't do anything because there was no money to do it with. I remember a particular time in my life where I worked as a kid making 50 cents a day at the second-hand store. A lady gave me an outfit and back then I didn't have boobs. And this outfit showed everything. And here I stood before a class in a spelling bee with this outfit, and it was big and hung on me like a sack. And all the kids laughed. Can you imagine? I went home crying. And I still remember to this day. I was never going back to school again.

Abuse in the Family

One final area which heightened the incompatibility of home life with school demands was the presence of alcohol, drugs, and physical and sexual abuse in a number of at-risk and single parent families. For many the abuse seemed a normal part of life since "it was all they had ever known." Of the at-risk sample, 19% stated that alcohol and drug abuse existed in their family, 13% cited the existence of physical abuse, and 15% reported being the subject of sexual abuse. A slightly greater percentage of single parents cited these same problems. Thirty-five percent

stated that they grew up in a home with alcohol and drug abusers, 24% had experienced or grown up in the presence of physical abuse, and 20% had experienced sexual abuse.

Although interviewees from both groups stated that abuse definitely affected their lives, it was rarely the factor single parents cited as their primary reason for dropping out. Rather, it was often the underlying reason for deciding to get married, or, with the at-risk group, the reason they started experimenting with alcohol and drugs.

II. The Relationship between Peer Pressure and Absenteeism, Peer Pressure and Drug/Alcohol Use, and Drug Use and Dropping Out

The following discussion compares and contrasts the importance of peer pressure and absenteeism, peer pressure and drug/alcohol use (henceforth referred to as drug use), and drug use and dropping out in the lives of single parents with those of at-risk students.

In general, respondents from both studies reported that peer pressure of many types was a very real problem for them. Many respondents stated that peer pressure was difficult to resist because of the possibility of rejection by their friends. The following quotation, by an at-risk student, reveals the importance of having and being accepted by friends:

> ...it's important to have friends. You have someone to tell your problems to and you don't have to go through the whole

> day being troubled inside yourself without no one to help you out.

Respondents from both studies stated that they had experienced peer pressure to skip school. Pressure to skip school was a much greater problem for single parents who dropped out after 1975. Almost double the number of single parents who dropped out after 1975 stated that peer pressure to skip school was a problem (82%) as compared with (43%) of single parents who dropped out before 1975. One at-risk student described the relationship between peer pressure and skipping school in the following quotation:

> The first time I was really paranoid, and then they started asking me to skip a lot, so I missed 15 days. Then, when I was here, I really didn't care about the work. I talked a lot. [This student also reported that she had a drug addiction]

Similarly, single parents who dropped out after 1975 were also more likely to report they had experienced other forms of peer pressure as well. In fact, single parents who dropped out before 1975 stated that drug and alcohol use were not very prevalent among teenagers. Only 25% reported that alcohol use among teenagers was a problem, 19% reported that drug use was a problem, and 14% of these single parents said they succumbed to peer pressure to use drugs or alcohol.

A comparison of these percentages with those for the single parents who dropped out after 1975 reveals a striking contrast. A majority (69%) of single parents who dropped out after 1975

reported that alcohol use was a problem among teenagers, 57% said drug use among teens was a problem, 69% said they had succumbed to peer pressure to use either drugs or alcohol, and 40% said peer pressure was a factor in their dropping out of school.

Like the single parents who dropped out after 1975, a majority of at-risk students reported that drugs (73.5%) and alcohol (73.5%) were important factors which negatively impacted students' performance in school. Indeed, a large percentage of these students said drug and alcohol use among teenagers was the major factor affecting student performance in school. Thirty-five percent of at-risk students admitted to succumbing to peer pressure to use drugs or alcohol. The following quotation suggests the prevalence of drugs in at-risk students' high schools:

> I watched a drug deal go down yesterday. [Interviewer: In school?]. Yeah, it's so widespread it's hard to imagine..what gets me is those people in SADD and groups like that are druggies and alcoholics, and you think they're good people, and they're just in it to be out of class and not because they believe it.

Both the single parents who dropped out after 1975 and the students who are currently at-risk of dropping out describe incidents which suggest a link among peer pressure, absenteeism, drugs, and dropping out of school. The following quotation is representative of a number of the younger single parents who experienced both peer pressure to skip school and to use drugs:

> I got in with the wrong crowd, I think from the time he [dad] had his heart attack...walking to school we were smoking pot and I thought it was the easier way out. I

> didn't want to deal with the problems at home, so I thought, well, this will let me forget it all. I started in my sophomore year. I went three days to school and skipped two. Everybody drank a lot at lunch and would get drunk and not come back.
>
> I had been in a lot of trouble...probably as a result of laying out of school with nothing to do and got involved with drugs and different things.

At-risk students also commented on the connection between drug use and absenteeism in the following quotations:

> A lot of kids would rather go out and get high than come to school.
>
> A cousin of mine quit school...he might have been doing drugs cause he missed a lot.

Respondents from both studies also talked about the connection between drugs and dropping out of school. One at-risk student said, "a friend of mine (who dropped out)..he'd rather sell drugs and make fast money than stay in school." Another at-risk student shared a story about a particular friend who was involved with drugs:

> No, I take it back. I've got one friend, he dropped out. I met him at church. And it's really strange. He's one of those people who did drugs and alcohol and everything. And his mom brought him to church one time, and that's all it took. He's totally turned around and he's going back to school. [Interviewer: Just from going to church once?] He said he came into Sunday school and our Sunday school teacher was talking about dropping out of school and about drugs and alcohol and he just sat there, like, gosh, I don't know, just stunned. He felt like it was meant for him.

A single parent, in describing the reasons her friends dropped out, said, "the ones I talked to, most of the reasons

they dropped out was from drugs." Finally, another single parent described a young man she knew who dropped out of school:

> I knew a kid, he was only 13 years old, and he got threw out of school for drugs. And he never did have the urge to go anyway. He was out every day of the week...it wasn't the fact that they [school] didn't care. He didn't care.

The crucial underlying factor in the relationships among peer pressure and drugs, peer pressure and absenteeism, and drugs and dropping out of school seems to be a strong need to belong to a friendship group. A teen's friendship group serves as a source of emotional support. The following quotations from several at-risk students illustrate the critical relationships among needing to belong and peer pressure and drugs:

> I think most students feel they'll fit in and say well, they do it, so if I do it, I'll fit in with the crowd.

> They say with drugs just tell them no. But it's not really that easy. You feel like, all your friends are around and you don't want to feel like a chicken, but you don't want to fall into that trap, because you'll be there forever. And it's really not that easy. It's really hard.

III. Relationship between Teen Pregnancy/Parenthood/Marriage and Dropping Out of School

This section discusses the important similarities and differences among single parents and at-risk students who were pregnant, married, and/or had children while in school. Single parents who dropped out because of pregnancy and/or marriage before 1975 reported that they did not feel their schools, families, and peer groups accepted or supported their finishing

high school. In contrast, single parents who dropped after 1975 and at-risk students who were pregnant, married, or had children reported that it was acceptable for girls in their situations to remain in school to obtain a high school diploma. Additionally, a majority of at-risk students who were pregnant, married, or had children stated they were not only accepted but were receiving the support they needed to do so.

This section also describes an important similarity among single parents and at-risk students who were pregnant and those who were parents. Both groups looked to significant others rather than themselves to provide their lives with meaning and purpose. Single parents sought meaning and purpose for their lives through marriage and their relationships with their husbands, while a large number of pregnant students and teen mothers in the at-risk study reported that "[they] have something to go for" now that they were going to have or have had children.

The critical roles that family, school, and peer support systems play in assisting teen mothers, married girls, and pregnant students in finishing school, and interesting features of pregnant girls and teen parents situations are also explored. These features include: An increase in structure as well as independence; more positive relationships with family members; and an increase in the amount of emotional and financial resources that pregnant teens receive as a result of assuming the responsibilities of parenthood.

Single Parents/Displaced Homemakers: Their Reasons for Leaving Home, Dropping Out, and Not Going Back

Pregnancy and marriage played a dominant role in single parents dropping out of school. Approximately 51% of the sample reported they dropped out of school because of marriage and/or pregnancy. Prior to 1975, the majority of respondents who dropped out for reasons related to marriage and/or pregnancy had been married prior to becoming pregnant. Many single parents appeared to be preoccupied with marriage. As one stated, "It was really all you ever thought about...if you didn't get married by the time you were 16, you were an old maid." Single parents who dropped after 1975 were more likely to report being pregnant prior to getting married. However, of those reporting that pregnancy preceded marriage, single parents who dropped out after 1975 were less likely to state that they married because of pregnancy.

We had speculated that single parents who dropped out before 1975 would be more likely to report pregnancy and marriage as their major reason for dropping out than those who dropped out during or after 1975. However, a chi square test indicated that single parents who dropped after 1975 were just as likely to report pregnancy and marriage as their major reason for dropping out.

Also, there has been a significant shift in the acceptance of teen pregnancy over time. For example, 73% of single parents who dropped out before 1975 reported that teen pregnancy was not accepted by people in their school and families as compared with only 20% of those dropping out during and after 1975.

The following quotations epitomize the dilemma of many who became pregnant before 1975: "You didn't go to school pregnant in my day." Another woman proclaimed, "it wasn't accepted the way that it's accepted now...if you got pregnant back in the 60s, you immediately got married or the man had to run."

The husbands of single parents who were not pregnant but chose to marry while in school played an influential role in their not finishing high school. They often found themselves in a predicament when they stated they wanted to remain in school:

> I wanted to but my husband didn't want me to. He said that when a woman gets through school and gets a job, she gets independent and she does things she wouldn't normally...they kinda wander off and do whatever they want.

Another woman shared,

> that just possessed my life, marriage did, I guess I really wanted to finish. But he was a little jealous. He was a whole lot jealous. He wouldn't let me go.

Home environment also played a role in many single parents' decisions to marry early in life. The influence of home environment on early marriage is seen in the following quotations from single parents:

> I was the oldest and all the responsibility was always put on me and I just figured the only way to get out of that

> responsibility for all my brothers and sisters was to get married and leave.
>
> I had no family support to keep me in school. I was told it was time I got married and made something of myself. You can't stay in school forever, so I didn't finish. I got married and had a child.

At-Risk Students: Finding Meaning and Direction through Early Pregnancy, Parenthood, and Marriage

Pregnancy, teen parenthood, and marriage play important roles in the lives of the at-risk students as well. But, a majority of at-risk students who were pregnant, had children, or were married reported that their determination to finish school had increased dramatically due to their parenthood or marriage.

In fact, students who were pregnant or had children often reported having a commitment to finishing school, an enhanced appreciation for the value of education, and a commitment to the future that they did not have before their pregnancies.

The following student expressed the sentiments of a majority of these students:

> Before I had Jamie [an alias], I didn't really care about anything. I was flunking out of school. I didn't care if I lived or died. But now that I have him, I have something to go for. I have a future...whereas before whatever happened, happened. I didn't try for nothin'. But I think now that I have him, it's given me something to go for. I want to get an education so I can make myself better for him and me.

This student admitted to skipping school "a lot," not doing her work, not caring, and having a zero grade point average prior to

pregnancy. She now has a C grade point average.

Also, a comparison of teen parents' grade point averages with those of other white, females who were not parents revealed that 89% of teen parents had grade point averages of C and above as compared with 50% of students who were not parents.

As one student stated,

> You have to have a high school education to get anywhere. I didn't know all this [education] before [having a baby]..I just didn't think about it.

And yet another student confided,

> I just didn't want to do the work. I was too busy with friends. I mean I goofed off in class, I didn't care. Now that I have the baby, I am going to buckle down.

Students who were pregnant or had children often reported a dramatic increase in self-esteem and self-confidence that they attributed to the trials and tribulations of teen parenthood.

As one young mother stated,

> Having Cathy [an alias] has helped a lot with that [self-esteem]. I've come to terms with myself...I just had real low self-esteem. I didn't like myself before, but then when I had Cathy...when I realized I was pregnant...I realized I had to like myself and respect myself or she wouldn't.

Also, these students have positive feelings about their increased responsibilities, and those feelings seem related to the increased <u>independence</u> and <u>decision making power</u> that also come with parenthood. A number of girls commented on how much they enjoyed "making decisions for myself and my baby" and that "she [mother] doesn't make decisions for my baby, I do." As another student said, "my parents used to try so hard to get

me to do my homework...they tried everything [but she didn't].., now I do it myself without anyone telling me."

At-risk students' positive attitudes about handling the responsibilities of teen pregnancy and motherhood may be directly attributable to their access to many types of support systems. The majority of pregnant students and female teen parents interviewed in this study had strong support systems to assist them in performing the dual role of parenting and being a student. The students were supported by the school through formal teen pregnancy programs, by their families, and/or by other pregnant/teen mother friends.

The types of support received were varied. They included emotional support in dealing with the shock of teen pregnancy and early parenthood, financial support in managing the expenses of pregnancy and child care, and guidance and information in handling the competing demands of student life and parenthood.

One student revealed the importance that support from family, school, and friends played in promoting education.

> My mamma assured me I was not [quitting because of pregnancy]. This same student reported, If it weren't for COPE [program for pregnant girls], I think I would have quit the whole time I was pregnant. I had a really hard pregnancy, and they let me rest when I was sick and everything. [When she thinks about quitting now]...My pregnant or married friends here at school talk me out of it, we all do that for each other.

The impact of school support is also illustrated by the students who said:

> I have some very supportive teachers and counselors, there are three I can think of right now that really helped me...they help you understand what's going on when you're pregnant, they help you deal with being a teenager who is pregnant.
>
> Yeah, my teachers care. They want to know what's going on, why you're having problems, why you was absent.

The husbands of at-risk students play a very different role than did the husbands and former husbands of participants in the single parent study. As one interviewee said, "My parents really don't want me to quit...but [laugh] they don't have to worry cause my husband won't let me quit either."

Being placed in a support system has other important effects. These include, an increase in structure as well as independence, more positive relationships with family members, and an increase in the amount of emotional and financial resources that pregnant teens receive as a result of taking care of the responsibilities of parenthood.

It appears that, for most who became pregnant and were placed into a support system (one that was either constructed to protect them or was already in place in the form of a school program), their lives became more structured as well as more independent. The students talked about how their lives had become more scheduled, planned, and organized. They were conscious of the concepts of time management and selecting priorities.

As one girl said, "I don't have time to just run around with my friends the way I used to, I've got too many other things to do."

Students also reported having more positive relationships with their parents than previously due to changes in their parents' supervisory and disciplinary styles. This finding was true for both girls whose parents had been "more strict" and allowed them "to do less" than their peers' parents prior to their pregnancy and for girls whose home environment was lacking adequate supervision and discipline prior to having a baby.

Many interviewees from homes which had been "overly strict" prior to their pregnancies believed that many of their rebellious actions were reactions to the strictness of their former home environments. As one girl from a strict home stated, "For some reason, I don't think I would've ended up like I am now [with a child], if she [mother] had been more lenient and trusted me more." Several girls explained that their parents were not only strict but very demanding and they always felt they didn't quite measure up to their parent's standards. One girl confided in the following quotation:

> I didn't feel perfect. She [mother] made me feel like I was supposed to be perfect, and I couldn't. She'd compare me to my fourth grade cousin who was making all As and I was making Cs and Ds.

The effects of parental supervision and discipline that was too permissive were similar to those which resulted from the home

environment being too strict. Those who had negative or nonexistent relationships with their parents prior to their pregnancies often reported that their parents' interest in them had increased after they became pregnant or had their children. The following quotation is from a student whose mom "didn't take an interest" in her or supervise her before she had her baby, but who is now developing a relationship with her mother:

> My mom thought I was no longer her responsibility since I have a child. She told me I had to move [when she found out the girl was pregnant]...[But], Yeah, now we're talking more than we used to; we're getting our relationship back now.

Another striking feature is the amount of positive, nurturing attention that support systems shower on these girls. Significant adults in their lives focus enormous emotional resources on preparing them to be competent parents. This attention was especially meaningful for those pregnant girls and mothers whose parents had not provided sufficient supervision and discipline or had been ineffectual prior to their pregnancies. Their parents were giving them more time and attention than in the past, and both parties seem to be communicating more meaningfully.

Finally, the support system seems to enhance coordination of school, work, and family life. These aspects of the girls' lives seem to be integrated and functioning in harmony rather than being in conflict.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explores the relationships between home structure and absenteeism; teen pregnancy, marriage, parenthood and dropping out of school; and peer pressure, absenteeism, drugs, and dropping out of school. The critical factor within each of the three themes appears to be the lack of adequate emotional, financial, and social support for at-risk students. Moreover, student absenteeism, a prevailing characteristic of "at-risk" students, appears to be linked to the lack of parental interest, supervision, and discipline in the home for both the single parent and at-risk respondents.

Pregnant, married, and parent teens in the at-risk study are receiving acceptance and support in finishing their high school education while adjusting to the responsibilities of early initiation into adult life. According to the women in the single parent population who began marriages and families during their school years, they were denied this support. This lack of support had grave impact on their ability to obtain their high school diplomas.

Results show that the increase in support experienced by at-risk students is related to increased acceptance of females attending school after childbearing and marriage. Such increased acceptance suggests that greater value is being placed on the importance of education for women. The striking contrast between

single parents who dropped out of school before 1975, and those who dropped out during and after 1975 is indicative of this major shift in attitudes.

The results further show that pregnant and parent teens have a strong drive to finish school and are being supported in their efforts to do so. The disturbing factor, however, is that their interest in school and in their future was minimal before they became pregnant or had children. The single parents who dropped out from 1944 through 1975 seemed to obtain their sense of self-worth and sense of identity from marriage, an attitude that is consonant with the dominant social values of that earlier time. The responses of current at-risk students, however, show little change from this posture. They report that they did not feel their lives had purpose or meaning until they had assumed the traditional role of mother. This raises questions of the time-lag between changes in prevailing social attitudes and changes in individual attitudes. It suggests, in fact, that social attitudes may have little impact, to date at least, on self-perceptions based on role expectations developed over many centuries.

Participants in both the single parent and at-risk studies also spoke to the critical importance of peer group membership, acceptance, and support during the teen years. When the peer group decides that drug use and skipping school are desirable activities, it becomes difficult to resist the call to conform.

Also, the regular use of drugs and alcohol produce effects and a state of mind within students which are incompatible with the responsibilities of student life.

In summary, the principal findings of this exploratory study suggest the following conclusions:

1. That attitudes about self-worth, at least among student dropouts and at-risk students, remain largely unchanged despite changes in social values.
2. That emotional, social, and financial support--the kinds of support that family, school, peer groups **can** provide--are essential to feelings of self-worth.
3. That at-risk students with this kind of additional support show greater probability of finishing school.
4. That there is a key relationship between absenteeism/dropping out and home structure, school environment, and peer support systems.

These preliminary conclusions raise numerous questions which should be addressed through further research. For example, we feel it would be useful to explore the same relationships in other populations and in other geographic locations. We also feel there is a need to probe more fully the relationship between home structure and absenteeism; pregnancy/marriage/parenthood and dropping out; and peer pressure and absenteeism. Other areas which should be explored include the relationship between home environment variables and school attendance variables; school and

community-based support systems and dropping out; teen pregnancy/parenthood and self-esteem; and the nature of peer group membership, i.e., the types that exist, what determines acceptance and rejection, and what is involved in changing membership from one group to another.

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